



Uninvited Guest That Won't Leave

By Susan Zito

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County

Yellow Starthistle, *Centaurea solstitialis*, an invasive weed, is an unwelcome guest in our gardens, along our roadways, pastures and rangelands. However, once it settles in and becomes established, it is very difficult to remove, just like an uninvited guest that won't leave.

Yellow Starthistle was introduced to California during the Gold Rush era around 1850. It came to California from Eurasia by way of South America. It is now common and recent reports indicate that yellow starthistle infests between 10 and 15 million acres in California. Seed can be introduced into the soil by cultivation, road maintenance, or overgrazing. For the homeowner, starthistle seed can travel onto a property via the tread of tires or simply by wind. It is estimated that seed production in a single starthistle plant can be as high as 30,000 seeds per square yard, with about 95% of that seed being viable.

How do we get this uninvited guest to disappear? It's not easy. Starthistle plants have a very deep taproot, making pulling the weed difficult. Persistence is necessary as control cannot be accomplished in a single treatment or in a single year. Biological control includes several natural enemies including two weevils, which lay their eggs in the flower/seed head, eliminating the ability of the plant to produce seeds. These insects already occur in many areas of California and are host-specific to starthistle. They do not attack commercially valuable crops or native plants. A new type of biological control for yellow starthistle was just announced by the United States Department of Agriculture, (USDA), allowing the release of a specific weevil, *Ceratapion basicorne*, in the United States. The initial release will be in California. The weevil is specific only to yellow starthistle, eating the flowers and seeds. It doesn't kill the plant directly but stunts its growth and doesn't allow it to reseed. It is hoped that by compromising the ability of yellow

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starthistle to reproduce, over time it will greatly reduce the occurrence and eventually eliminate this destructive plant.

Starthistle begins emerging with fall rains and continues to germinate during the rainy season. Once the rains end, it is necessary to remove small plants before they can become established and set seed. However, if a late rain occurs, a new crop of starthistle may emerge, so diligence in keeping known starthistle areas weeded is essential. For the homeowner, this is the most practical way to eradicate this invasive weed. Mowing is possible but must be well-timed before the plant is in full flower. Too soon and the weeds will reemerge; too late and seeds will create a new crop of starthistle.

Control practices can reduce yellow starthistle, but in the absence of competition, it will often reestablish. Planting desirable plant species, including native wildflowers, can prevent starthistle seed from germinating. Fertilizing the wildflower seed can produce a vibrant crop of flowers, greatly reducing the viability of the weed seed. Starthistle doesn't like competition, and robust native wildflowers can effectively get our unwanted guest to skedaddle.

For more information in controlling and eliminating starthistle, join Master Gardener Steve Savage tomorrow, Saturday, November 14th from 9:00 a.m. to noon at the Government Center Building C, 2850 Fairlane Drive, Placerville. This free public education class will include information on starthistle's origins, how it moves, why it is so difficult to control, how to overcome these difficulties and how to design an effective control program.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (530)621-5512, or send us an email using the Ask a Master Gardener option on our website. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. We also encourage you to visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind Folsom Lake College, El Dorado Center. See http://mgeldorado.ucanr/Demonstraton_Garden for more information and days and hours of operation, or call us to schedule a tour. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://uncanr.edu/master_gardenere-news. Master Gardeners are also on Facebook and Instagram; we hope you enjoy our postings and will share them with your friends.